

# Of Rules and Rails: On a Motif in Tolstoy and Wittgenstein

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There is a lot to be learned from Tolstoy's bad theorizing about how a work of art conveys 'a feeling.' (Wittgenstein, *Culture* 58)

Interpreters of Wittgenstein have long acknowledged the philosopher's admiration for Tolstoy's life and works, especially his later writings.<sup>1</sup> While the established evidence is compelling, I think that Tolstoy's artistic and essayistic texts—his images, ideas and thoughts—are far more deeply implicated in Wittgenstein's thought than has hitherto been recognized. In the present essay I will endeavor to show how a certain line of reasoning in Wittgenstein can be seen to be responding to a problematic mooted in Tolstoy's texts. That is, by way of rational reconstruction I will show how aspects of Wittgenstein's thought can elucidate Tolstoy, help us understand his theory of art and, most importantly, help us see how that theory ultimately fails. I proceed by first introducing meaning skepticism and the theory of expressivism that I will trace out in Tolstoy (section I), then showing how that theory arises in response to the Cartesian structure of meaning skepticism Tolstoy explores in *Anna Karenina* (section II). I then reconstruct Tolstoy's theory of aesthetic expressivism in *What Is Art?* (section III), and identify an implicit problem in his assimilation of art to affective response (section IV) that, I argue, is developed by Tolstoy in his novella *Kreutzer Sonata* (section V). In the final section (section VI) I return to *What Is Art?* to locate a surprising reprise of a familiar image, and suggest that it indicates a failure by Tolstoy that Wittgenstein helps us to recognize.

## I.

We may introduce our problematic by considering one of the most famous scenes in *Anna Karenina*, the betrothal ceremony between Levin and Kitty. At first they stumble through the ritual while being corrected by those officiating, for the words and gestures seem abstract, artificial to the couple. At one point Levin poses to himself the question: "Does she feel the same as I do?" (452). Kitty, like Levin, finds she cannot understand the meaning of the words, but is overcome by a sense of joy and fulfillment, and those emotions are in turn expressed directly and immediately to Levin and indeed, all attending:

"All this is very beautiful," Kitty thought, listening to these words, "all this cannot be otherwise," and a smile of joy, which involuntarily communicated itself to everyone who looked at her, shone on her radiant face. [...] Levin looked at her and was struck by the joyful glow of her face; and the feeling involuntarily communicated itself to him. He felt just as bright and happy as she did. [...] The spark of joy that flared up in Kitty seemed to have communicated itself to everyone in the church. To Levin it seemed that both the priest and the deacon wanted to smile just as he did. (457–458)

Such immediate, involuntary communication, taken as an "allegory of reading," stands out because of all it leaves out: There seems to be no interpretive step in understanding, no need for considered reflection on what the expressions (facial or linguistic) might mean, no need to justify one reading against another. As a theory of read-

ing, there is no risk of error, of misinterpretation, because, apparently, there is no conceptual possibility of divergence either between the author's intentional states and their externalization in the written text, or in turn between the written text and the reader's understanding of it. Thus there is no breach between intended meaning and understanding that threatens to widen into a more radical skepticism about meaning altogether.

This account of understanding, which Tolstoy will define and defend in *What Is Art?*, I shall call expressivist: on this account, the artwork immediately expresses or manifests only itself, not something other than itself, separable and free-standing—say, an independent meaning content to which it is related—that would allow the skeptical wedge to be driven between authorial intentionality, text, and interpretation. (In contrast to Pomorska, such non-inferential understanding need not be instinctual or intuitive nor based on iconic signification; it can be trained and conventional). While the expressivist theory of art, for which Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* is taken to be foundational, is itself a multifarious body of thought that has developed its own set of debates (Ridley) all that my expressivism amounts to is the claim that there is a mode of understanding signs in which the sign directly manifests its meaning content, without the necessary recourse to an act of interpretation: An act where a reason or ground or justification is sought in taking the sign to have a certain meaning content.

By denying the necessity of the step of interpretation in understanding, expressivism denies the structural feature characteristic of the Cartesian picture of the mind. The Cartesian picture assumes a potentially unbridgeable divide between the internal mental realm and the external realm of behavior, including linguistic behavior. Thought is identified with an inner mental realm and expression is then seen to be the externalization of that mental content in linguistic or behavioral signs that require interpretation. In this picture, the rules of

language use for instance—knowing how to use a sign or concept in the appropriate circumstances to express one's intended thought—can succumb to the same conceptual gap, such that there arises an epistemological necessity for interpretation.

The Cartesian divide admits, perhaps invites, the thought that each application or recognition of a sign's use necessarily requires the subject to interpret the sign, to decide whether it falls under the rule of its application. The metaphysical skeptic demands to know how one, in general, abstracted from any particular situation, can know with certainty that the rule of his sign's use is the correct one.

The temptation is to respond to the skeptic with an equally metaphysical answer and to claim that the meaning of a sign—all its correct potential applications in specific contexts—is somehow necessarily contained in the rule of its use, which the person somehow possesses. This metaphysical response to the metaphysical skeptic has been called "meaning platonism," for it asserts that to know the meaning of a word, say, is to know already its correct applications or interpretations in possible future contexts. So the meaning platonist accepts the skeptic's premise that recognizing the meaning of a word necessarily requires interpreting it, but cuts off a potential regress in interpretation by claiming that a person possesses all those correct interpretations simply in virtue of knowing what the word means. In §218 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein captures this metaphysical urge toward meaning platonism in a striking image when he considers how one might be led to think that the values of a mathematical function or series are already somehow present in the mind of the person who knows how to compute the function:

Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series [e.g., the concept "natural number"] is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? Well, we might imagine rails instead of a rule.

And infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule.

The pressure that leads to the fantasy of rails extending into the future is the skeptical question of how one can be certain that one in fact possesses the concept in question, that one understands all its possible contexts of correct usage. In his explication of the problematic, Saul Kripke (1982) adverts to the example of addition. In her life a person may well have performed thousands of additions correctly, but however large a number of cases is involved, that number is still finite. So how can that person be sure she knows how to add, that is, that she knows what the concept of addition is, what “addition” and “+” mean, for an indefinite, indeed infinite number of cases? This is the epistemic version of content skepticism: How can one be sure one has correctly grasped what a given concept or sign means? But the skepticism can extend to a metaphysical version of content skepticism: One may doubt that there is any fact of the matter regarding what a concept or sign means. Varieties of this metaphysical content skepticism include Quine’s indeterminacy thesis and Derrida’s theory of *différance* and the trace.

The meaning platonist responds to content skepticism by claiming that there is a rule—e.g., the rule of addition—that automatically foreordains, as it were, its every correct application. The rule is inherent in, intrinsic to, the concept of addition, or the sign “+,” itself. In this sense the response adverts to a claim about the metaphysics of meaning. The dialectic of course proceeds from here, but for my present purposes it suffices to bear in mind the picture of meaning Wittgenstein’s image of infinite rails is meant to conjure, together with the problematic from which it emerges, a problematic that Tolstoy also confronted.

## II.

Tolstoy was writing *Anna Karenina* when overcome by his crisis, and one can read the text as an exploration of the skeptical problem outlined

above, for the novel traverses the Cartesian divide between inner intentionality and external behavior through implicitly comparative portraits of characters’ interior mental lives—or lack thereof—and their outward social behavior, conceived as habits, codes, norms, roles, rules and metaphorically, rails.

Several of the terms used in *Anna Karenina* to refer to codified behavior—“колея,” [железная] “дорога,” “рельс,” etc.—either name or evoke railways, and readers have long interpreted the role of rails in the novel in relation to Tolstoy’s criticism of railways, itself echoed by Levin, and which was widespread among Russian cultural conservatives at the time. For our purposes the observation by Gary Jahn is particularly apt: “Several particular qualities of the “social” are suggested by the use of the railroad as its sign[...] [T]he social involves rules and orderliness as suggested by the tracks along which the train must run and in the mechanical (that is, also, logical) nature of the object” (Jahn, “Image” 6).

Even more suggestively, Russian “рельс” (cognate of English “rail”) as social “rule” is in fact a *figura etymologica*: “rail” derives via Middle English [“reyle, raile”] and Old French [“reille” (“iron rod”)] from Latin “regula” meaning “straight stick, rod, bar, pattern,” itself related to “regere” (“to rule”) and “rex” (“king”), from which comes “rule” (Фасмер, *Oxford English Dictionary*).

The connection between “rails” and “rules” is made explicit—together with the Cartesian picture underwriting it—at one point in the novel, when the narrator observes of Vronsky:

Though the whole of Vronsky’s inner life was filled with his passion, his external life rolled inalterably and irresistibly along the former, habitual rails [по прежним рельсам] of social and regimental connections and interests. (173)

It is precisely this structure of external, public behavior and internal, private motivation that leads to the meaning skepticism articulated in section I above. While Vronsky’s inner life remains isolated

from his external, societally codified behavior, Anna's husband Karenin by contrast allows himself to perceive only the external behavior in his confrontation with her and demands of her only that outward appearances be maintained:

Despite all he had seen, Alexei Alexandrovich still did not allow himself to think of his wife's real situation. He saw only the external signs. He saw that she had behaved improperly and considered it his duty to tell her so. [...]

"But I demand that the outward conventions of propriety shall be observed until"—his voice trembled—"until I take measures to secure my honor and inform you of them." (211, 213)

Thus Tolstoy exposes the structure of external/internal by cycling through its possible permutations in the men orbiting Anna. Of course this structure of external/internal, social code/private intentionality is not new to Tolstoy—indeed, it is one of the defining characteristics of the "society tale" genre of the 1820s and 1830s (Мейлах)—but Tolstoy combines the permutations this structure offers with realistic psychological descriptions of the consciousness of characters. And he does so in such a way that both extremes emerge and threaten autonomy: external roles, ruts, duties, customs devoid of intentional meaning—Karenin's fulfilling the requirements of officialdom and later of religion—and intentionality collapsed upon itself, unable to realize itself in any socially recognized role—Karenina's final journey to the train station.<sup>2</sup>

In *Anna Karenina* Levin, like Tolstoy, seeks salvation from the metaphysical skepticism attending the Cartesian structure. If his friends described Tolstoy as "the greatest of skeptics" (Amfiteatrov in Eikhnenbaum, *Sixties* 120), we recall Levin confessing on the eve of his wedding, "My chief sin is doubt. I doubt everything and for the most part live in doubt" (440). Levin arrives, like Wittgenstein, at a "therapeutic solution" to his doubts; he overcomes his crisis by quieting his will to pose the

skeptical question after he experiences moments of understanding that do not require the step of interpretation between external behavior and internal intentional state, cases of immediate, will-less understanding, most famously during the ring-exchanging ceremony with Kitty discussed above. Thus such immediate, will-less understanding of a feeling, by denying the necessity of interpretation, avoids the dilemma posed by meaning skepticism and meaning platonism: between Levin's doubts of there being any meaning on the one hand, and meaning as social rules, troped as rails, on the other. (McDowell interprets Wittgenstein along these lines.)

### III.

*What Is Art?* presents the explicit theoretical justification of the immediate understanding of feeling introduced above. The essay rejects all Western European aesthetic theories centered on the idea of beauty, in favor of an expressivist account of art's affective causal influence.

Tolstoy presents his positive, normative theory of genuine art in two broad steps. The *first* step is to define the activity of art as the conveyance of a feeling from author to recipients, by which they are united. The organizing trope of the effect of art as "a means of communion among people" (49, trans. modified) is "infection":

*To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience may the same feeling—this is the activity of art.*

*Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them. (51)*

Tolstoy grounds this aesthetic experience in the general phenomenon of immediate emotional contagion, as when

a man infects another or others directly, immediately [прямо непосредственно], by his appearance or by the sounds he gives vent to at the very time he experiences the feeling; if causes another man to yawn when he himself cannot help yawning, or to laugh or cry when he himself is obliged to laugh or cry, or to suffer when he himself is suffering [...]. (50)

Here Wittgenstein can offer an indirect gloss by way of his reflections on expressivism and understanding in his later writings. His paradigmatic example of this phenomenon is our reaction to a face:

“We see emotion.”—As opposed to what?—We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features.—Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face.

This belongs to the concept of emotion. (*Zettel* §225)

Wittgenstein suggests that in general perceptual experiences of emotion occur without the step of interpretation: It is not the case that we see a particular face and then interpret its expression as being joyful or sad. Rather, according to Wittgenstein, we should say the face at once expresses joy or sadness—because the face and its expression are not two separate and independent elements requiring a mediating interpretation, but rather a single experience of immediate understanding. The perception, that is, hinges on the attitude one takes towards a person, rather than an inference one makes about a person: “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion*

that he has a soul” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* part II, iv).

Now one might counter that physiognomy and immediate empathy is one thing, the interpretation of signs and symbols another, and indeed Tolstoy stipulates that such emotional contagion is not yet art, which begins “when a man, with the purpose of communicating to other people a feeling he once experienced, calls it up again within himself and expresses it by certain external indications” (50, trans. modified). But Wittgenstein demurs: Understanding can be just as immediate, interpretation need not take place when understanding symbols or signs either:

What happens is not that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do no interpreting. I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present picture. When I interpret, I step from one level of thought to another. (Wittgenstein, *Zettel* §234)

Wittgenstein is not denying the possibility of (even potentially endless) interpretation, rather he is noting how special such a move is, how much has to have gone wrong for such a move to be called for in our everyday experience. Wittgenstein reminds us that very often we do not set off on unending interpretive quests, because there is no reason or cause, no sensible skeptical itch, to do so. Thus Wittgenstein is making an observation about our attitude, our will, rather than presenting a metaphysical argument regarding the indeterminacy of meaning or the structure and play of the sign. And it is this observation that perhaps underlies Wittgenstein's reaction to *What Is Art?*:

Tolstoy: a thing's significance (importance) lies in its being something everyone can understand.—That is both true and false. What makes a subject hard to understand—if it's something significant and important—is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and

what most people *willfully want* [wollen] to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect. (Wittgenstein, *Culture* 17, trans. modified)

And elsewhere Wittgenstein notes that in Tolstoy's aesthetics "you might say: the work of art does not aim to convey *something else*, just itself" (*Culture* 58–9). For Tolstoy in *What Is Art?*, as for Wittgenstein, non-interpretive understanding occurs because the will to interpret has been stilled, no longer obstructing our immediate recognition of what is obvious in our everyday lives. Tolstoy's expressivist aesthetics would then be an analog of this experience in the realm of art.

Importantly, at this stage in Tolstoy's presentation of his theory, which I've called his first step, he explicitly denies that the content of the feeling conveyed has any bearing on infectiousness as the pragmatic criterion of genuine art. In his initial definition of art he writes: "The feelings with which the artist infects others may be most various—very strong or very weak, very important or very insignificant, very bad or very good..." (51). As he nears the conclusion of this first step in his presentation, he repeatedly maintains what could be called the "content-indifferentism" of genuine art:

*The stronger the infection, the better is the art as art*, speaking now apart from its subject matter, i.e., not considering the quality of the feelings it transmits.

[Sincerity, particularity, clarity of the feeling] are the three conditions which divide art from its counterfeits, and which also decide the quality of every work of art apart from its subject matter. (141, 142)

Clearly artworks conveying feelings of misery, horror, loathing, murderous rage and so on, could qualify as genuine artworks as easily as the exam-

ples of pity, joy, and motherly succor. The criterion of authentic art is for Tolstoy completely amoral.

This brings us to Tolstoy's second step in the exposition of his theory, in which he provides criteria for the evaluation of the content of artworks, the specific feelings they convey. Those criteria are explicitly ethical, and are anticipated in Levin's conversion during the ring-exchanging ceremony with Kitty, when Levin finds that it is Kitty's attitude towards him and the situation, rather than the words of the prayers, that is meaningful. And on subsequent occasions Levin surprises himself in finding prayers and oaths meaningful not independently of his attitude towards the words, but precisely because of his attitude towards them. For instance:

[...] during the time of his wife's confinement an extraordinary thing had happened to him. He, the unbeliever, had begun to pray, and in the moment of praying he had believed. But that moment had passed, and he was unable to give any place in his life to the state of mind he had been in then. (787, trans. modified)

Levin utters words and performs rituals, but only on certain occasions does he find them animated with significance; the outward performance is unchanged, but his attitude towards the words, their audience, his actions and their effects, is completely different.

In the final words of the novel, Levin, having therapeutically stilled his skepticism about the meaning of life when he realizes that the doubt was, like the question, nonsensical, concludes that it is precisely his attitude, not his reason, which dissolves the doubt. Outwardly his behavior will appear unchanged though in actuality all has changed because now imbued with ethical significance by his attitude:

I'll fail in the same way to understand with my reason [pazymom] why I pray, and yet I will pray—but for my life now, my whole life, re-

ardless of all that may happen to me, every minute of it, is not only not meaningless [бессмысленна], as it was before, but has the indubitable meaning of the good [несомненный смысл добра], which it is in my power to put into it! (817, trans. modified)

Wittgenstein comes to a similar view at the conclusion of the *Tractatus*:

6.41 The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value.

If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being—so. For all happening and being—so is accidental.

What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world, for otherwise this would again be accidental.[...]

6.43 If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language.

In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.

The world of the happy man is quite another than that of the unhappy.

Values, like the Kantian “good will,” are not facts of the world, otherwise they would be contingent, as are all empirical facts; and Levin too insists that the good, what confers sense upon the world, exists independently of whatever contingently might happen to him within the world. As one commentator puts it:

[...] Wittgenstein takes essentially the same approach [as Kant] to problems of logic and problems of value. Neither concerns the merely contingent; instead they concern necessary structures within which contingency obtains. In the

Kantian sense, both logic (6.13) and ethics (6.421) are *transcendental*. (Fogelin 97)

We can see Tolstoy taking up this thought when he turns to the task of distinguishing good and bad art in *What Is Art?*:

The estimation of the value of art (i.e., of the feelings it transmits) depends on men’s perception of the meaning of life, depends on what they consider to be the good and the evil of life. And what is good and what is evil is defined by what are termed religions. (54)

Tolstoy has a Rousseauistic Enlightenment story at hand, in which mankind advances by developing better—that is, “[...] more or less good, more or less necessary for the well-being of mankind” (143)—feelings and sentiments which constitute an age’s “religious consciousness,” a potentiality present in all the age’s people, but demonstrated in specific leaders who express or manifest this advanced “meaning of life” (42), religious consciousness as the awareness of good and evil. And, as we saw in Levin’s conversion, in *What Is Art?* Tolstoy holds that the good is not determinable by reason or thought, but is transcendental:

The good is the eternal, the highest aim of our life. No matter how we understand the good, our life is nothing else than a striving towards the good—that is, towards God.

The good is indeed a fundamental understanding [понятие],<sup>3</sup> which metaphysically constitutes the essence of our consciousness, an understanding indefinable by reason.

The good is that which no one can define, but which defines everything else.<sup>4</sup>

If we read this passage over the shoulder of Wittgenstein, we find a powerful theory. The meaning of life, the good, is a certain ethical attitude that pervades one’s consciousness, that is, it is not something in the world, but how one views the world; and hence it transcendently conditions

how everything in the world seems. This attitude is thus a feeling, not susceptible to reason or thought, inexpressible in the language of natural science. The improvement of mankind thus depends not on rationality, but rather on feeling, which is disseminated by genuine, that is, infectious artworks. Thus “it is this religious consciousness that decides the value of the feelings transmitted by art,” “good art, conveying good feelings, and bad art, conveying wicked feelings.”<sup>5</sup>

Tolstoy understands the religious consciousness of his age to be the Christian principles portrayed in the Gospels:

The consciousness that our well-being, both material and spiritual, individual and collective, temporal and eternal, lies in the growth of brotherhood among all men—in their loving harmony with one another. (*Art* 145)

The purpose of this religious consciousness is to unite all people, and according to Tolstoy there are only two kinds of feelings capable of such influence, and therefore there may be only two types of good art: “religious art,” which is “art transmitting feelings flowing from a religious perception of man’s position in the world in relation to God and to this neighbor”; and *universal art*, “art transmitting the simplest feelings of common life, but such, always, as are accessible to all men in the whole world[...]. Only these two kinds of art can be considered good art in our time” (*Art* 151–2).

#### IV.

Tolstoy’s assimilation of art to affect—and, as we’ll see, above all musical affect—in his model of infection involves a problem, however. For infectious affect, understood as a causal or dispositional relation, does not allow for the possibility of misunderstanding. Meaning, however, bears a normative relation: knowing the meaning or use of an expression requires that one be able to distinguish between correct and incorrect uses of that expres-

sion: that’s constitutively part of what it means to understand an expression at all.

In *Anna Karenina* the verb “to infect” [заражать] refers to immediate physiological mimicry, either exemplified by or likened to the infectiousness of a yawn or laughter: “And Betsy obviously tried to restrain herself but failed and burst into the infectious laughter of people who laugh rarely” (297). And late in the novel, in part six, “infectious laughter” becomes a virtual *Leitmotif* of the minor comic character Veslovsky, the young, fat, gregarious nobleman accompanying Oblonsky who misfires his hunting rifle and chases peasant girls.

These uses of the verb “to infect” seem to signify simply a *causal* relation: involuntary mimicry that may not transmit any meaning content at all. That is, consider the paradigmatic cases of the “infectious” effect, yawning or laughing: The recipient may not think himself tired, or judge something to be funny, but the effect comes off nonetheless. As a causal relation, infection occurs willlessly not because the will to interpret has been stilled, but simply because the will cannot be involved in the first place: the reaction is involuntary in the physiological sense, and there is no normative relation possible. In the novel “to infect” is lexically contrasted with “to communicate itself” [сообщаться], which is reserved for the conveyance of meaning content and which therefore in principle could be misunderstood. Several examples of the latter relation include Levin and Kitty during the ring-exchanging ceremony discussed earlier, and Vronsky’s correctly or incorrectly understanding Anna’s emotions (Tolstoy, *Anna* 149, 150, 188, 314).

The inchoate distinction at work lexically in *Anna Karenina* between causal effect and understanding normative meaning content—both occurring immediately, without the interference of the will to interpret—returns during the unfolding argument of *What Is Art?* But here the distinction is not marked lexically between the two verbs “to

infect” and “to communicate itself”: rather it inhabits the meaning of “infection” and “infectious feelings” as they are used throughout the treatise and indicates a fundamental tension within Tolstoy’s aesthetic theory. In chapter V of *What Is Art?* Tolstoy provides examples of infectious “feeling”:

To take the simplest example: one man laughs, and another who hears becomes merry; or a man weeps, and another who hears feels sorrow. A man is excited or irritated, and another man seeing him comes to a similar state of mind. By his movements or by the sounds of his voice, a man expresses courage and determination or sadness and calmness, and this state of mind passes on to others. A man suffers, expressing his sufferings by groans and spasms, and this suffering transmits itself to other people; a man expresses his feeling of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to certain objects, persons, or phenomena, and others are infected by the same feelings of admiration, devotion, fear, respect, or love to the same objects, persons and phenomena.

And it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man’s expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based. (49–50).

The broad scope of Tolstoy’s notion of feeling extends from mimicry of sensations (excitement, irritation) and objectless moods (merriness, sadness, calmness) causally induced by activities such as laughing or crying through to occurrent emotions incorporating cognitive judgments, propositional attitudes and intentional objects (fear *of*, devotion *toward*, admiration *of*). But such a broad scope ignores the very difference between dispositional affective reactions that are merely causal effects on the one hand, and judgments with propositional content, that is, meaning content which presupposes a normative relation of correctness, on the other. (Robinson interprets Tolstoyan “infection” as “somatic mimeticism,” itself composed of

both causal “somatic transfer” and normative “somatic guidance,” thus restating without resolving the tension.) The assimilation of meaning content, with its inherent normative relation, to the causal–dispositional model of infection becomes most problematical in the case of music.

Tolstoy’s diaries and letters indicate that while he was working out his aesthetics in *What Is Art?* and *Kreutzer Sonata* he was wrestling with Schopenhauer’s philosophy (Eikhenbaum *Sixties*, Medzhibovskaya, Orwin). While space here does not permit consideration of the significance of Schopenhauer’s philosophy for Tolstoy, his philosophy of music precisely identified the tension between causally induced affect and normative meaning content inherent in Tolstoy’s theory.

According to Schopenhauer, the singular metaphysical significance of music is that, unlike the other art forms, it is non–representational. Music presents the fundamental forces of nature directly and hence is “instantly understood by everyone [with] direct understanding” (I: 256). He continues:

[...] music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motives for them. (I: 264)

According to Schopenhauer, music expresses feelings “without the motives for them,” that is, the intentional states (beliefs and desires) that make them the “definite feelings” Tolstoy demands of moral art. Thus the problem is that music elicits “essential” feelings “without the motives for them,” that is, causal affect without specific meaning content.

As the earlier quote from *What Is Art?* acknowledges, art may infect “whether the work is moral or immoral,” and each recipient will expe-

rience it “in his own way.” Generalized, the danger is that causally induced affect may be amoral or immoral because divorced from the larger intentional context that specifies its meaning content. Music (other than communal forms like peasant round-dances and folk songs) is the extreme version of this potential because, in Tolstoy’s understanding of Schopenhauer, it does not convey a specific meaning content at all, while its causally induced affect may be quite powerful.

Whereas Tolstoy intends his aesthetic theory to convey moral guidance—that is, religious or universal values—the content of such music will essentially depend on the will of the recipient.

### V.

In “The Kreutzer Sonata,” which Tolstoy wrote concomitantly with *What Is Art?*, the protagonist Pozdnyshv restates the problem precisely, describing music in now familiar causal terms, as involuntary mimicry or stimulant:

Music makes me forget myself, my true condition, it carries me off into another state of being, one that isn't my own: under the influence of music I have the illusion of feeling things I don't really feel, of understanding things I don't understand, being able to do things I'm not able to do. I explain this by the circumstance that the effect produced by music is similar to that produced by yawning or laughter: I may not be sleepy, but I yawn if I see someone else yawning; I may have no reason for laughing, but I laugh if I see someone else laughing. [...]

And that's why music only irritates and doesn't follow through. A military band plays a march, say: the soldiers march in step, and the music's done its work. An orchestra plays a dance tune, I dance, and the music's done its work. A Mass is sung, I take communion, and once again the music's done its work. But that other kind of music's just an irritation, an excitement, and the action the excitement's supposed to lead to

simply isn't there! That's why it's such a fearful thing, why it sometimes has such a horrible effect. [...]

[T]he generation of all that feeling and energy, which are quite inappropriate to either the place or the occasion, and which aren't allowed any outlet, can't have anything but a harmful effect. *On me, at any rate*, that piece had the most shattering effect; I had the illusion that I was discovering entirely new emotions, new possibilities I'd known nothing of before then. (96–7, emphasis added)

Only if music is contextualized within a practice—marching, dancing, etc.—can its powerful causal affect be semantically contained. Otherwise its effects are, as Pozdnyshv says, potentially “horrible.”

The tension between the causally affective and normatively meaningful that we saw inhabiting Tolstoy's understanding of aesthetic “infection” recurs in *Kreutzer Sonata*. One could characterize the general tactic of Pozdnyshv's self-exculpation as that of desublimating or naturalizing the normatively meaningful, by which I mean that he reduces moral concepts and categories to their supposed physiological causes, often using what could be called hydraulic imagery. The greatest targets, of course, are the romantic notions of love, which he redescribes in the purely physiological vocabulary of cause and effect: Love is not the expression of moral sentiment, but the release or “safety valve” of pent-up energy:

Every day each of us eats perhaps two pounds of meat, game and all kinds of stimulating food and drink. Where does it all go? On sensual excesses. If we really do use it up in that way, the safety valve is opened and everything is all right. If, on the other hand, we close the safety valve, as I did mine from time to time, there immediately results a state of physical arousal which, channeled through the prism of our ar-

tificial way of life, expresses itself as the purest form of love, sometimes even as a platonic infatuation. I, too, fell in love that way, like everyone else. (46)

And Pozdnyshev describes the causal effect of contemporary music—"the most refined form of sexual lust" (100)—according to exactly the same hydraulic model: It arouses energies without providing a meaningful "outlet." For Pozdnyshev, thus, sex and art are both matters of physiology: cause and effect, irritation and satisfaction, safety valves and outlets.

Pozdnyshev functions as an extreme spokesperson for those whom Tolstoy in *What Is Art?* calls "aesthetic physiologists," for whom art is "a form of play in which man releases a surplus of stored-up energy," and is likened to "getting drunk or smoking opium" (129).

However, *Kreutzer Sonata* is perhaps most intriguing in how it indirectly demonstrates the role of will in the reception of music: Pozdnyshev is a man who wills his causal dependencies. He is a virtual chain-smoker, drinker of tea so strong it is "really like beer" (36, trans. modified), possibly an opium addict (his wife made several suicide attempts, at least once with opium; one must wonder whence she obtained it). He is definitely a self-confessed fornicator [блудник], where "[b]eing a fornicator is a physical condition similar to that of a morphine addict, an alcoholic or a smoker of opium" (Tolstoy, "Kreutzer" 41).

Several critics (Gustafson 352–5 and Knapp 39–40) rightly emphasize Pozdnyshev's addictions, but to my mind they overemphasize them all as "intoxications," thereby missing Pozdnyshev's greatest dependency: jealousy (on this see Felman).

Tolstoy takes some care building this into Pozdnyshev's narrative. His first mention of jealousy in fact reveals that it had bedeviled him even before he was married: "[...] the torments of jealousy *reawoke* in me: they continued to plague me throughout the whole of my married life[...]" (66,

my emphasis; see also 79); and later in his story he refers to "similar attacks of jealousy I'd had previously" (105). In his uncontrollable sounds and gesticulations, his addictions, his jealousy and even his desperate need for an addressee, Pozdnyshev manifests his will to causal dependency.

Pozdnyshev tells his listener that during his return journey from his country estate to confront his wife and her suspected lover, the rhythm of the train so affected him that under its influence he imagined again her adultery: "It was as though some devil was inventing the most abominable notions and suggesting them to me against my will." He then adds, "I'd pace stumblingly up and down, willing the train to go faster; but the carriage just went on shaking and vibrating all its seats and windows, exactly as ours is doing now" (103, 104). As Pozdnyshev recounts his story in the train carriage he voluntarily boarded he becomes—again—more and more agitated.

How are we to understand Pozdnyshev's seemingly willful dependence on the world? In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein maintains that ethics, like logic, is transcendental (6.421). Cora Diamond provides a helpful gloss:

[J]ust as logic is not, for Wittgenstein, a particular subject, with its own body of truths, but penetrates all thought, so ethics has no particular subject matter; rather, an ethical spirit, an attitude to the world and life, can penetrate any thought or talk[...]; the ethical spirit is tied to living in acceptance that what happens, happens, that one's willing this rather than that is merely another thing that happens and that one is in a sense "powerless"[...]. (153–4)

Now one might suppose that Pozdnyshev fulfills that condition, albeit in a strained sense, because he appears to be so dependent on the impingements of the world; but he wants and seeks out those impingements, and this betrays his immeasurable willful grasp upon the world, which becomes resentment and jealousy when, as it must, the world

fails to answer his will, the conditions he lays down for it. I think Pozdnyshv means something like this when he admits that:

What was really so horrible was that I felt I have a complete and unalienable right to [his wife's] body, as if it were my own, yet at the same time I wasn't the master of this body, that it didn't belong to me, that she could do anything with it whatever she pleased, and that what she wanted to do with it wasn't what I wanted. (105–6)

Like Levin after his conversion in *Anna Karenina*, in *What Is Art?* Tolstoy espouses a similar ethical transcendentalism when he defines the good as “a fundamental concept, which metaphysically constitutes the essence of our consciousness, a concept indefinable by reason”<sup>6</sup>; and when he acknowledges that “[t]he estimation of the value of art (i.e., of the feelings it transmits) depends on men’s perception of the meaning of life, depends on what they consider to be the good and the evil of life” (54). And precisely this creates a significant problem for Tolstoy, for he wants genuine artworks to instill and foster moral sensibility, religious values and universal feelings.

Because music can be morally inert while still causing a powerful feeling “without motive,” the normative meaning content will be determined by the recipient’s good or evil will that contextualizes the feeling. Thus, Schopenhauer’s view implies that the effect of music, and perhaps other art forms, is determined by, rather than determining of, the ethical outlook of the recipient. And we recall that in reporting the “fearful [and] horrible effect” of music in general, Pozdnyshv was careful to qualify “for me, at any rate.” If an evil attitude or will can thwart the will-less immediate understanding that Tolstoy advocates in *What Is Art?*, he may feel the metaphysical pull to somehow guarantee the universal transmission of those values he wants art to instill in people.

## VI.

This reading of *Kreutzer Sonata* and *What Is Art?* identifies a distinct problem for Tolstoy: If ethics is transcendental, an enabling condition for, rather than fallout from, the infection of a universal or religious feeling by a genuine artwork, then how can the success of the infection, which Tolstoy has made the very criterion of genuine art, be assured? If art is supposed to transmit the noblest religious feelings and universal sentiments of everyday life immediately, without interpretation, and yet depends on the good will of the recipient, how can those ethical—normative—effects of art be universally assured?

He has a surprising answer, one that leads him unfortunately to fall behind his own best insights. By all appearances, *What Is Art?* concludes with chapter XIX, which is nothing less than a manifesto of what future art must and will be, according to Tolstoy. Yet there is a twentieth chapter, in which Tolstoy appears to redress the problem I have been teasing out, when he asserts that art itself must provide the religious and universal content so as to found the communion and community it hitherto has tacitly relied on:

The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one’s neighbor, now attained only by the best members of society, the customary feeling and the instinct of all men. By evoking under imaginary conditions the feeling of brotherhood and love, religious art will train men to experience those same feelings under similar circumstances in actual life; it will lay in the souls of men the rails along which the actions of those whom art thus educates will naturally pass. (190)

Although overlooked by several extended studies of the treatise (Diffey, Jahn “Aesthetic Theory,” Silbajoris, Zurek), in one compacted sentence, on the verge of self-contradiction, Tolstoy ushers back in precisely the image—and its significations throughout his writings—that on my

reading he had endeavored so earnestly to prescind from his aesthetics. Against the whims of causality art will lay down the normative “rails” along which people's behavior will henceforward run “naturally.” Art will lay the rails of communal understanding along which collective consciousness will be “given” a semblance of a “natural” community. Only in this way can infection ultimately be guaranteed.

Recall that the metaphysical skeptic demands to know how one, in general, abstracted from any particular situation, can know with certainty that the rule of his sign's use is the correct one, whether there is any fact of the matter of a correct rule of application at all. Moreover, recall the temptation to respond with an equally metaphysical claim that the meaning of the concept or sign is foreordained, idealized in the metaphysics of the concept or sign itself. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein addressed the specter of radical skepticism regarding understanding a word or concept and being able to use it correctly in an open-ended context in the future: “How am I able to follow a rule?—if this is not a question of causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do” (§217). We recognize the same distinction—between causal-dispositional effect and normative meaning content—with which Tolstoy grappled: Is the infectiousness of art mere causality (like infectious yawning) or does it involve the normativity of what should be communicated, and hence at least in part rely on the recipient's “attitude to the world”? It is at this point in the dialectic that Wittgenstein invokes the same metaphor as Tolstoy in order to capture the idea of meaning platonism:

Whence comes the idea that the beginning of a series is a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity? Well, we might imagine rails instead of a rule. And infinitely long rails correspond to the unlimited application of a rule. (*Philosophical Investigations* §218)

The pressure that leads to the fantasy of rails extending into the future is exerted by the skeptical question of how one can be certain that the proper application of a given concept—its meaning content—is fixed in all possible contexts, and knowable.

The analogous question in Tolstoy's treatise is how we can be sure we are the community we assume ourselves to be, such that we all will recognize, respond to and participate in the aesthetic experiences that constitute our communal understandings, our being a community at all. Wittgenstein calls such a fantasy of infinite rails a “crossing of different pictures of determination” (§191), that is, the confounding of a causal with a normative relation when thinking about meaning, just as Tolstoy undertook in his conception of infectious feelings as both causally efficacious and normatively constrained.

The rational reconstruction presented here suggests, but does not directly claim, a far deeper affinity between Tolstoy and Wittgenstein than has heretofore been recognized in the literature. As rational reconstruction, however, Wittgenstein's analysis of meaning platonism in the *Philosophical Investigations* as the conflation of the causal-dispositional and normative dimensions of meaning provides a therapeutic diagnosis of Tolstoy's similar conflation of the two dimensions in his theory of the artistic infection of feeling.

Wittgenstein's rejection of the infinite rails as a fantasy of a metaphysical “given” translates into a rejection of Tolstoy's falling back into meaning platonism in his invocation of the metaphor of rules as rails, of the novelist's attempt to make art the guarantor of a communal understanding that at best is always an empirical, contingent and ongoing but distinctly un-metaphysical achievement.

## Notes

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1. Monk (115–116, 569) has written of the young Wittgenstein's fascination with Tolstoy's *A Brief Exegesis of the Gospel*, and colleagues including Rhees and Engelmann have attested to Wittgenstein's extolling Tolstoy's later tales. For good summaries of the recorded evidence, see Davison and Greenwood.

2. The other metaphorical use of "rails" during this period can be found in "The Memoirs of a Madman" (written in 1864, but published only posthumously), which artistically recounts the skeptical crisis Tolstoy suffered, resulting in all meaningfulness leeching out of the narrator's actions:

[...] I lived on what had been previously begun. I continued to roll along the rails laid down by my former strength, but I did not undertake anything new. And I took less part in those things I had previously begun. ("Memoirs" 300, trans. modified)

Here, as with the passages about Vronsky and Karenin, external, fixed behavior is divorced from internal intentional states.

3. Понятие can also mean "concept," but that would flatly contradict Tolstoy's claim that it is indefinable by reason.

4. This passage was added by Tolstoy after the Maudes' translation had been published. My quotation is from the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation, 52.

5. Pevear/Volokhonsky, 53 (see above).

6. Pevear/Volokhonsky, 52 (see above).

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